



PREVIOUS SPREAD Campement
Urban *Urban Scenario*
2008, *Living Pictures/*
What is Missing? 2010,
installation view, Penrith
Regional Gallery & The
Lewers Bequest

LEFT Ash Keating
Procession 2 High Street,
Penrith City Centre,
4:00–5:00 pm Wednesday
4th March 2009

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The Power of the Artist

ELAINE LALLY

The idea that 'creativity' is more important than ever before has received widespread attention in the past few years. The work of writers such as Richard Florida and Britain's Comedia group has spurred intensive debate about creativity and innovation that has found its way into policy debates in Australia and internationally. Charles Landry and Franco Bianchini, for example, propose that social and economic development in the industries of the twenty-first century 'will depend increasingly on the generation of knowledge through creativity and innovation'.¹ Richard Florida's work has directed attention to the role of creative workers, that is, those who are 'primarily paid to create and have considerably more autonomy and flexibility' than workers who are paid primarily to execute according to plan.² 'Creativity has come to be valued', suggests Florida, 'because new technologies, new industries, new wealth and all other good economic things flow from it'.³ The 'creative industries' are paradigmatic of this new valorisation of creativity: it remains an attribute of individual people, but becomes something more in the form of 'imaginative innovation as the very heart – the pump – of wealth creation and social renewal'.⁴

In much of this writing, however, creativity is spoken about in strangely decontextualised terms. It is 'a capacity inherent to varying degrees in virtually all people',⁵ a sort of universal lubricant of innovation and of economic and technological development. In a sign that there is some anxiety among policy makers that creativity and innovation must be found in real-world applications and contexts, the Australian Federal Government chose to commence its 2009 innovation policy by reassuring readers that 'innovation is not an abstraction'.⁶

- 1 C. Landry and F. Bianchini, *The Creative City*, London, Demos, in assoc. with Comedia, London, 1995, p. 4
- 2 R. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Pluto Press, North Melbourne, 2003, p. 8
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 21
- 4 J. Hartley, 'Creative industries', in J. Hartley (ed.), *Creative Industries*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Mass., 2005, p. 4
- 5 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, p. 32
- 6 K. Carr, in Commonwealth of Australia, *Powering Ideas: An Innovation Agenda for the 21st Century*, Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Canberra, 2009, p. iii, viewed 23 October 2009, <<http://www.innovation.gov.au>>



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Interestingly, artists themselves tend not to talk about what they do in terms of creativity. Instead, like other art-world insiders, artists speak of what they do in terms of *practice*. Seen from this perspective, creativity is not a decontextualised and abstract capacity. As professionals with highly specialised skills, knowledge, discipline and talent, artists, it has been recently suggested, should be thought of 'like scientists' in their capacity to innovate, and to generate new ideas and new ways of understanding the world.⁷ This chapter explores the potential for the practice of artists, like the C3West artists whose projects were described above, to be thought of as a form of innovation that spans both arts and non-arts contexts.

The Artist as Creative Catalyst

C3West aims to innovate through engagement in new contexts for contemporary art, at the intersection of cultural institutions, corporate organisations and communities. In collaboration with its corporate partners, it attempts to intervene in their relationships with existing constituencies of some kind (to avoid the essentialising terminology of community). The role of the artist is to become involved in that relationship and *remediate* it in some way. To put it another way, the artist acts as a kind of creative catalyst.

The distinctive contribution of artists is centrally about their creative capacity in relation to the imaginative generation of ideas. Sir Ken Robinson defines creativity as the capacity to have original ideas which have value.⁸ Innovation is therefore not just about the generation of ideas but also involves how they are made use of by others. The potential for artists to innovate in non-arts contexts – as C3West seeks to promote – relies on their ability to think outside the taken-for-granted, but in ways that connect with the diverse understandings of everyone involved and which (potentially at least) have value for them. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, for example, suggests that innovation requires 'the kind of creativity that leaves a trace in the cultural matrix'.⁹ This

occurs when a person, using the symbols of a given domain such as music, engineering, business, or mathematics, has a new idea or sees a new pattern, and when this novelty is selected by the appropriate field for inclusion into the relevant domain.¹⁰

Not all artists are able to work in this way. As Sarah Thornton has pointed out, 'in the context of an expanded market for





concept-based work, the integrity and accountability of artists are as important as the specific aesthetics of their work'.¹¹ Declan McGonagle takes an institutional perspective in calling for a 'new deal' between art and society, in which formal and institutional arts structures are 'reconnected to a social continuum and also [to] art's aesthetic and ethical responsibilities', and 'which the dynamics of negotiation and the idea of artist as negotiator serve'.¹² In selecting artists to be involved in C3West projects, curatorial decision-making focussed on short-listing highly accomplished and successful contemporary visual artists whose practice is characterised by an emphasis on process-based collaborative work with communities. It was essential that the artists had a record of working with communities in ways that are respectful and ethical and which result in some benefit for the community. As Claire Doherty has argued, socially engaged practice needs a language and a critical framework capable of 'differentiating between different types of engagement, intention and legacy'.¹³ Claire Bishop also suggests that it is the quality of the relationships produced that are important in socially engaged art.¹⁴

The international artists invited to take part in C3West provided a model through their work for how both artistic excellence and integrity within community engagement can be achieved. An important strand of Jeanne van Heeswijk's practice, for example, aims to reconnect people to the places where they live, and to transform their relationships to it and to each other. The starting point for the work is normally community-based, but draws diverse stakeholders into what she calls the 'field of interaction' of the project, by building 'creative teams which allow for participation of government, of local people, of arts and of companies'.¹⁵ Participants share a sense of a 'kind of urgency to work on a certain issue'. She generally involves the corporate sector within these configurations, but what is most important is that people 'feel committed to the right here and now'.

Van Heeswijk has said that her work is successful 'if it leaves everyone slightly changed'. This way of working, as the former director of Campbelltown Arts Centre Lisa Havilah has observed, is characteristic of artists of this kind: 'If you can get people to focus on the act of creating something, or the act of collaborating, which artists can get people to focus on very well, then things happen'.

'Resculpting Circumstances'

A strand running through Craig Walsh's practice is that of making visible the taken-for-granted assumptions about people,

- 7 Centre for Social Impact and Arts Queensland, *New Models, New Money: A Foundation for the Artist*, Arts Queensland, Brisbane, and the Centre for Social Impact, Kensington, NSW, 2009, p. 6, viewed 27 September 2010, <<http://www.csi.edu.au>>
- 8 K. Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative*, Capstone, Oxford, 2001
- 9 M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, HarperCollins, New York, 1996, p. 27
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 28
- 11 S. Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, Norton, New York, 2008
- 12 D. McGonagle, 'Foreword', in D. Butler and V. Reiss (eds), *Art of Negotiation*, Arts Council of England, London, 2007, p. 9
- 13 C. Doherty, 'Engaging places: participation as the process, medium and subject of making art', in J. Montagu (ed.), *Open Space: Art in the Public Realm in London 1995–2005*, Arts Council England, London, and Central London Partnership, London, 2007, p. 28
- 14 C. Bishop, 'Antagonism and relational aesthetics', *October*, vol. 110, 2004, p. 65
- 15 Quotations from C3West stakeholders and participants were drawn from interviews conducted as part of the Art of Engagement research project, unless otherwise specified





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places, relationships and circumstances. As he puts it, 'for me, that's always fascinating with my practice, because I'm actually interested in how you can subvert that, that expectation of environment'. The choice of still imagery for his C3West project *Heads Up*, for example, contrasts with rugby as a dynamic, fast-moving and kinetic activity: 'I thought the idea of subtracting from that environment and creating large digital stills, and trying to capture the emotion, was a way of interacting with that environment and providing a contrast to what you would normally expect'.

Ash Keating's practice also disrupts expectations about proper forms of behaviour through the highly visible interventions he makes in public space. His work creates mnemonic links between waste and consumption which are designed to bring people to their senses about this contemporary issue. The Westfield shopping centre in Penrith, for example, he saw as 'a very systematic authoritarian style place, where people shop and people expect things to be a certain way'. The slow procession of the performers with their trolleys were 'often walking a similar speed to the shoppers...because they're somewhat hypnotised by the spectacle of what is around them', Keating explained. In an article for *Photofile*, Melissa Amore describes *Activate 2750* (Keating's C3West project) as cultivating 'a strange dystopian world', that is a 'ghastly awakening [and] reminder of a future, threatened by over-consumption, population and global warming'.¹⁶

It has been suggested that artists can be considered as workers whose core skill is one of 'material thinking', and indeed the creative process is one in which 'the decisions that characterise it are material ones'.¹⁷ As forms of material culture (in the anthropological sense), art works realise or release 'the inventiveness of matter in a way that eludes descriptions of reality couched in terms of simple concepts, one-to-one equivalences or...free-associative poetic reveries'.¹⁸

In the contemporary world, spaces of mass consumption are the most spectacularly vivid displays of material culture that we ordinarily encounter. Keating describes *Activate 2750*'s interventions – aimed at shocking viewers into seeing the 'normality' of an environment like Penrith's High Street or its Westfield shopping mall with fresh insight – as creating an 'absurd reflection'. The colours of the cloaked performers echo the visually excessive shop displays, and the trolleys, 'are full of colourful but unparalleled material that is actually part of the process of making a lot of this stuff that you see on offer as a finished product'.





In contrast, art works are 'eloquent' – indeed if anything, excessively articulate – because they are a symbolic representation of the world that 'participates in its complexity rather than eliminates it'.¹⁹ In diverse ways, the artists working with C3West have built their creative practice around process-based forms of engagement that are articulate, as exemplars of material thinking, because they are 'articulated – jointed or joined together'.²⁰ Although the artists share an aim to intervene, and not just observe and re-present, they describe how they do this in quite diverse ways. Walsh, as we saw above, aims to create representations that disrupt expectations of particular places. While Walsh does not create 'absurd' reflections in Keating's terms, both artists design an experience that requires the viewer's cognitive engagement in decoding and interpreting the elements of 'surprise' in their own response.

Sylvie Blocher and François Daune describe the work of their collective Campement Urbain in terms of 'infiltration', and of what they call a 'dispositive' approach. They understand this in terms not of providing a 'truth' or a 'solution' but as a proposal for 'a sort of system that people can take and work with'. Theirs is an open and changeable collective, where the mix of skills and expertise is extended according to the particularities of each situation they are invited to work in.

Campement Urbain make a strategic claim to occupy the space of art with their work. They could otherwise be identified as a kind of interdisciplinary urban 'research and development' consultancy, since Daune is an architect and urban designer and the collective has in the past included sociologists, landscape designers and philosophers. As Doherty has pointed out, artists are given the latitude to 'circumnavigate predictability', and may be perceived to be non-threatening to other professional disciplines because they are assumed to not have power.²¹

The artist is a kind of cultural outsider who is able to ask pertinent and impertinent questions, and is expected to provide a 'fresh' perspective. Blocher observes that 'when you are an artist they all think you are mad!' In their experience, the legitimacy of the artist is not called into question, and 'we don't look dangerous'. But they are therefore able to 'ask the question that nobody wants to ask, and nobody wants to hear'.

Most importantly, making art is about the exploration and communication of how things *might be*, not just how they are now. In the case of C3West, the artistic imagination has to be tempered by grounding it in the realities of a specific context. The artist's vision may be somewhat utopian but must evoke a sense not just

16 M. Amore, 'Trans-garbage aesthetics', *Photofile*, vol. 87, August–November 2009, p. 55

17 P. Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2004, p. xi

18 *ibid.*, p. xii

19 *ibid.*

20 *ibid.*

21 C. Doherty, 'The new situationists', in C. Doherty (ed.), *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2004, p. 8





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of how things might be, but also of how they might become, with all the complexities and contradictions that implies. This is perhaps of most significant consequence in the work of Campement Urbain at Penrith, where the artistic work may have large-scale and permanent effects in the landscape itself.

Improvising Innovation

Essential to the artist's capacity to reimagine – in the context of particular places, people and 'situations' – is their skills of observation. Van Heeswijk describes it in the following terms: 'It's very important how people tell it to me, or show me something, and for me to see it in their context'. She refers here to a specificity to the topic she is looking for, not just in words but also in imagery and in 'forms of resistance that are within the daily, that are a way to stress an issue that should be made visible'. As a form of research – of creating knowledge of the situation – this involves observing very broadly, and keeping an open mind. 'I really try to listen and even listen between the lines to what people are saying', she says. Remaining open to the diversity of people's experiences but also trying to take it all in and come to an understanding of it can lead almost to a sense of being overwhelmed: 'I have all these voices in my head telling me things, you know, "Pay attention to this, look at this, do that"'.

The role of the artist can therefore be thought of as one of organising complexity. The artist must find the idea that has a simplicity and elegance within the messiness of the world as it is observed. This is essentially because creativity can be most productive when it builds 'on the shards and fragments of different understandings'.²² This is not dissimilar to the brokerage skill of 'joining the dots', referred to in Chapter 2 and described further in Chapter 9. In a sense, brokerage – or negotiation in McGonagle's terms cited above – is a key process 'all the way down' in the development of C3West projects. Each in their own way, the C3West artists profiled within this volume clearly have exceptionally well-developed skills in translating between diverse perspectives and languages. The identified role for brokerage in C3West has perhaps served to highlight the distinctive skill set involved: an ability to speak to art world outsiders and insiders alike, to community members and business people in language they understand, and the ability to link objectives in aesthetic and curatorial domains to those in the corporate and community sphere. It would be easy to respond to the complexities of these diverging agendas in ways that miss the mark, by presenting the community's interests in





patronising or simplistic terms, or by taking an overly didactic or sentimental approach to communicating an issue. In the case of collaboration with the commercial sector, there is an additional risk that the artist's intervention may be interpreted as a public relations or marketing exercise for the company.

Bishop proposes that socially engaged art requires 'intelligence and imagination and risk and pleasure and generosity, both from the artists and the participants'. The best collaborative art, Bishop suggests, derives not from an 'injunction to "love thy neighbour"', but from the position of "do not give up on your desire"²³. For van Heeswijk, the artist needs to be 'light-footed', indeed 'to be playful really, to dance with the situation', to avoid potential pitfalls to 'become too pedagogic about it or too righteous'. It is 'the people and their stories' which are most important and she says that her skill as an artist may be 'not to connect it but to show movement through it'.

In both van Heeswijk's and Keating's work, the issue to be addressed was that of sustainability, waste and recycling. This is an issue that is widely represented in contemporary media, so to avoid clichés and create an image that is new and addresses the concept of waste as a cultural attitude rather than a technological concern, as the narrow focus on recycling so often is, requires a sophisticated combination of ethical, aesthetic and informational qualities. To do this with intelligence and humanity, in van Heeswijk's practice, often involves a touch of humour. This is a way of making the issue *present*, rather than *representing* it: 'I think actually representation shifts the image away from reality and I think we have to reconnect, we have to reimagine'. The task is not 'to try to find a way to represent these people's stories but to make them present in a certain way'.

As Kwon has pointed out, one consequence of the reconfiguration of the role of the artist in this type of project, as can be seen in C3West, is as 'a cultural-artistic service provider rather than a producer of aesthetic objects'.²⁴ This is not to suggest that the artist's skills, talent, creativity or capacity for innovation are any less important than in more object-oriented modes of practice. If anything, they are even more critical in such collaborative endeavours.

The increasing demand internationally for process-based projects tied to particular localities, situations or groups of people, Kwon suggests, is part of a current effort 'to redefine the art-site relationship, [and] this is partly due to the conceptual limitations of existing models of site specificity'.²⁵ A redefinition of site-

22 M. Schrage, *Shared Minds: The New Technologies of Collaboration*, Random House, New York, 1990, p. 41

23 C. Bishop, cited in J. Roche, 'Socially engaged art, critics and discontents: an interview with Claire Bishop', *Community Arts Network Reading Room*, 2006, viewed 27 September 2010, <<http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom>>

24 M. Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, p. 4

25 *ibid.*, p. 2





It was just like a pile of rubbish. Literally. But I get it now, after reading the signs. YOUNG FEMALE

Well you try and recycle everything, but there's just so much that you can't. I think I've become more conscious of recycling since I had grandchildren. I think I'd better start leaving them a good world. You know, we were so just 'chuck it, chuck it, chuck it'. You've got to recycle. I know a lot of people don't recycle. They just can't be bothered, you know, just laziness, whatever it is. If they came down and saw this, because you could re-use so much of this. I hate wastage, anyway. OLDER FEMALE RESIDENT

How the hell do you call that artwork?

YOUNG MALE PASSERBY WITH FRIENDS

I don't like it. I think it's a disgrace. YOUNG MALE TWO

I don't see how that could be art work

YOUNG MALE THREE

I don't like it. FEMALE PASSERBY WITH A MALE COMPANION

I don't understand it, quietly. MALE COMPANION

It just looks like a pile of rubbish in a nice garden.

I mean, I like art, you know, paintings and scenery but I don't understand this. We thought the builders had just thrown something out.

FEMALE PASSERBY

It is important to raise awareness about that stuff, you know, like, we're eating up the planet.

FEMALE PENRITH RESIDENT





specificity needs 'to imply not the permanence and immobility of a work but its impermanence and transience'. In theoretical terms, this resonates with Bruno Latour's statement that 'places do not necessarily make a good starting point, since every one of them is framed and localised by others'.²⁶

Van Heeswijk says that what she aims to do is to 'resculpt circumstances', often in a playful or humorous way, using a highly collaborative process that involves the participation of many community members and other stakeholders. The role of the artist, in her view, is 'to reimagine a certain situation', and then to work by 'reorganising, resculpting, rearranging reality, or I should say, circumstances'. Van Heeswijk makes a distinction between fantasy and imagination: imagination has a relationship to reality, whereas fantasy may not. She sees this, in artistic terms, as a kind of *portraiture*, as 'like 3D real life portraits of an actual situation'. By creating an image of a certain community, and in fact by involving the community members themselves in the creation of that image, the potential is created for the community themselves to *become* the image that they themselves are part of creating.

Activating 'Community'

The artistic projects discussed here demonstrate that 'community' must be thought of not as a settled collectivity hailing from a bounded region or postcode, but as a more or less dispersed and multi-scaled *constituency*, assembled through the creative process itself. Constituency is a term that has a number of advantages. It recognises that C3West's corporate partners have networks of relationships that the arts projects tap into, but which are broader and more long term than these interventions. It also reduces the scope for distorted expectations about a localised 'return on investment' for engaged art, and captures a more dynamic and active sense of collectivity.

Bishop has pointed out that 'considering the work of art a potential trigger for participation' is not new.²⁷ In contrast to 'interactive' works in which the only participation required of the viewer is their presence, Bishop quotes Thomas Hirschhorn's understanding of his work as 'active work': 'To me, the most important activity that an art work can provoke is the activity of thinking...An active work requires that I first give of myself'.²⁸ Active work is as likely to be experienced in a gallery setting as elsewhere. Taking such work outside the gallery, however, and placing it in contexts where it will be encountered by people who are not seeking an experience of art, creates opportunities for

26 B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 197

27 Bishop, 'Antagonism and relational aesthetics', p. 61

28 T. Hirschhorn, cited in Bishop, 'Antagonism and relational aesthetics', p. 76





I have strong memories of filming an Aboriginal man who talked about his unbelievable childhood in the prison-schools reserved for them. There was also a Mexican woman who, after suffering a violent kidnapping in a taxi in Mexico, sought refuge with her husband in Australia. But she didn't cope with her new Australian world well; for her, it had lost all sense of culture, and she dreamed instead of learning to speak the language of birds. Or the story of a young teenager, who advocated Nazism under the pretext that Penrith had been invaded by outsiders. ARTIST SYLVIE BLOCHER



FOLLOWING SPREAD

Stills from Sylvie Blocher *Living Pictures/What is Missing?*
2010, single-channel video
installation, Commissioned by
Museum of Contemporary Art,
Sydney for C3West

the work to be engaged with by people who would not otherwise come into contact with it. Is it important that the status of the work as art be made explicit in whatever context it is available to be experienced? Some passers-by at the *Activate 2750* installation, for example, assumed that the pile of waste was a by-product of renovation works that had been recently undertaken at the nearby library. The security fencing which surrounded the work may have facilitated this interpretation; Keating had not wanted to have it installed, but the council insisted on it for public liability reasons.

In her paper 'Antagonism and relational aesthetics', Bishop draws on the work of Laclau and Mouffe to argue that a fully functioning democratic society is one in which 'new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate', which is to say that 'relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased'. The task is to balance the tension between 'the concept of utopia [without which] there is no possibility of a radical imaginary' and 'a pragmatic management of a social positivity without lapsing into the totalitarian'.²⁹ In much of the work described under the rubric of 'relational aesthetics', Bishop suggests, the relationships are essentially harmonious and there is 'no inherent friction since the situation is what Bourriaud calls "microtopian": it produces a community whose members identify with each other'.³⁰

The perspectives offered by passers-by at the *Activate 2750* installation and processions delineate a space for debate that is not directed towards achieving a consensus about the work. Reuben Keehan describes Keating's work in terms of activation and performance: 'Keating...transforms non-art material into art by activating it in such a way that it performs itself'.³¹ The installation and events occurred in spaces where there is an easy assumption of relatively harmonious use of public space and consumption. However, as Sylvie Blocher observed, at certain times (particularly on Thursday evenings) tensions and confrontation erupt in these same spaces. In her work for C3West, *What is Missing?*, Blocher used the insights gathered through her observations to create a different kind of space for exploration of the tensions and contradictory experiences of the 'community' of Penrith.

In Rancière's often-quoted formulation, the aesthetic is the ability to think contradiction.³² Indeed, like many other forms of material culture, art works are 'capable of manifesting – and making liveable and practical – transcendent or contradictory values and meanings'.³³ In general the artefactual world – as exemplified in commodities, for example – is culturally conservative, producing and reproducing accepted meanings, values and practices. Art

- 29 Bishop, 'Antagonism and relational aesthetics', p. 66. See also E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edn, Verso, London, 2001
- 30 Bishop, 'Antagonism and relational aesthetics', p. 67
- 31 R. Keehan, 'Double agents: complication in recent performance', *Art & Australia*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2009, p. 150
- 32 J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. G. Rockhill, Continuum, London, 2004
- 33 E. Lally, *At Home with Computers*, Materializing Culture, Berg, Oxford, 2002, p. 34









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C3west CONTEMPORARY ART
COMMUNITY
COMMERCE



Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art and three cultural institutions in Western Sydney – Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Penrith Visual and Performing Arts and the Campbelltown Arts Centre – have teamed up as "C3West" to demonstrate that contemporary artists can play a unique role in social innovation beyond the confines of the art world, without giving up artistic value.

During 2004-2010 C3West commissioned four Australian and international artists – Craig Walsh, Sylvie Blocher, Ash Keating, and Jeanne van Heeswijk – to produce art in partnership with a range of business partners in Western Sydney, including a rugby league club and two environmental and waste management companies. The resulting artworks – embracing highly inventive processes of community participation and creative artistic skill – are intricate showcases of what this book calls "the art of engagement".

The Art of Engagement reveals the dynamics of such unique arts-business-community collaborations, while exploring their aesthetic, social and political dimensions. This collection of essays and documentation puts the C3West experiment in an international context, and invites us to rethink what contemporary art can mean in Australia while promising a rich, intelligent and delightful book.



THE
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